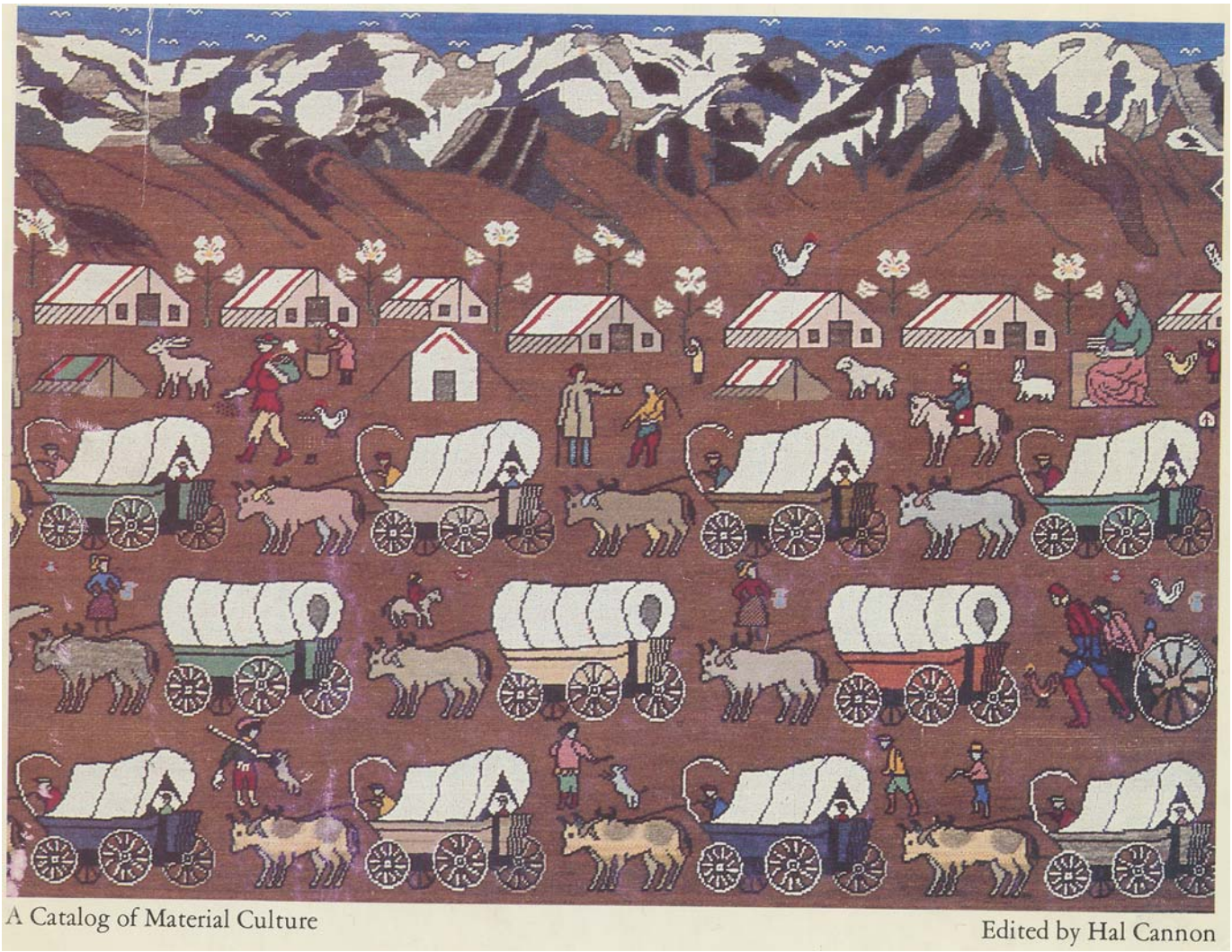
Utah Folk Art



A Catalog of Material Culture

Edited by Hal Cannon

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Fig. 44
Mt. Carmel. Karl Haglund.
Photograph. 1978.
This town lies just east of
Zion National Park and
dramatically illustrates the
conflict between man and the
land in the harsh Great Basin.

Silhouetted against the rugged Great Basin landscape (Fig. 44), folk architecture in Utah is highly visible. The old adobe, stone, and brick homes of the Mormon pioneers have captured the attention of scholars and the general public alike with their stately affirmation of historical continuity.[2] As visible signs from the past, these old buildings are comforting yet at the same time aloof and mysterious; for such houses can potentially tell us much about early Utah history, but our inability to comprehend totally the architectural vocabulary remains frustrating. For a variety of reasons, old houses have proved to be elusive historical documents.

The precise intentions of a builder working in the 1860s are impossible for us to know directly. Builders' diaries and record books are uncovered only rarely. The people who could answer our questions concerning architectural motives are now gone and for the most part remain nameless in history. Deprived of the irretrievable initial context, the historian logically turns back to the buildings themselves for answers. Even here, standing before the real and touchable artifact, the analyst must cope with complicated methodological problems. The houses from the nineteenth century which can be found in Utah today, many severely altered, retain little of their original appearance and personality (Figs. 45 and 46). Utahns approach them and speak of their "architectural heritage," expecting vague recollections of pioneer forefathers to suffice for explanation and meaning. The term *heritage* implies something acquired from predecessors—architecture, in this case. The historian's task is to discover the nature of this inheritance.

Dismayed by the scarcity of primary sources, intimidated by the size of the state, and confounded by the complexity of the extant architectural record, students of Utah folk housing have consistently turned from the analysis of actual buildings to seek answers elsewhere. Often the labels popularly attached to historic houses have served as the basis for scholarly interpretation. In Utah, houses from the 1849-80 period are typically "Mormon" or "pioneer" houses and are identified with the folk (or vernacular) phase of architectural development. "Pioneer" suggests sacrifice and hardship, "folk" connotes the plain and unsophisticated, and the fact that Utah folk housing is overwhelmingly Mormon furnishes the emerging image with the saintly qualities of purpose and order. From this perspective, old houses are practical adaptations to the frontier environment, they are preeminently primitive and simple in their design (waiting for high-style fashion to rescue them from their humble existence), and ultimately they are the solid and humorless manifestations of Mormon kingdom-building in the Great Basin.[3] Accordingly, the unknown has been rendered understandable through an informal partnership with concepts that are locally well known.